

A Story

Monika Armstrong

I remember the smell of Sears — the nut and candy booths in the middle of the aisle, directly in front of the entranceway. What child could resist throwing pride to the wind and making himself a circus attraction over double-dipped chocolate peanuts? I thought that the counter girls were goddesses. I couldn't think of anyone else who would deserve working in a Sears nut and candy booth. It was all so perfect. Even the bags had character — white and aqua striped with "Sears" written in script. They were wax lined so not one bit of chocolate could be wasted. When I was eating Sears' double-dipped chocolate peanuts, I knew there was a god.

As I stand here now, waiting in the checkout line with my 3-year-old on my ever-widening hip, I remember. Sears has changed. Nowhere do I see a candy booth, or smell that smell. I look around and notice that all is chrome, and the air reeks of new carpet.

That reminds me that I need vacuum cleaner bags. The perky checkout girl with dimples and braces rings up my Clairol home permanent. She looks at me in a kind of sorrowful and almost condescending way, as if to say, "It's not going to help, but I'll let you buy it anyway." What does she know? I look at her with the wait-til-you're-my-age-with-a-kid-and-no-husband curse in my eyes.

As I leave the little bitch and walk to the vacuum center, I realize that I'm only 28. What am I doing to myself? Just because he left doesn't mean that my life should end. Who gives a damn? He's gone, and I know that he's never coming back.

I think about my youth at Sears. Mom would buy me a pound or two of chocolate peanuts and we would leave the candy booth, Mom clutching my arm and I clutching my candy. We would walk past the tools and washing machines and vacuum cleaners. There would always be a man standing near the aisle on a piece of red carpet. In one hand, he held a vacuum cleaner, and in the other, he held a jar of dusty, ashy, hairy junk. I knew he smiled because he got to pour the mess onto the nice, clean carpet. I remember hearing all of the mothers in the crowd gasp as he began to pour. The man would then stomp on the dusty, ashy, hairy junk to make sure tht it was ground in well. He would then turn on his super-duper, ultra-deluxe Kenmore vacuum cleaner and all of the dusty, ashy, hairy mess would disappear — all of

that work sucked up in an instant.

The vacuum cleaner man is gone now. He left years ago. I walk through the aisles and finally find bags for my vacuum. I wonder where the man got his miraculous vacuum. My Kenmore sure the hell doesn't work that well.

An acne-plagued, awkward boy rings up my bags. I remember that I need a couple of towels. The His and Hers set that was given to us as a wedding present has become thin. Besides, I only have half of the set. When he left, I ravaged all of the His towels with my Fiskars and mailed them to him.

The towels are upstairs, so I decide to take the escalator. When I was young, I thought that the escalator was an amusement for kids. I thought that Sears had the best ride in the universe. I would clutch my candy until it felt like an extension of my arm and ready myself for the adventure. Mom would always have a checklist to go through. I used to think that she had aspirations of being a pilot.

"Slow down." (check)

"Shoes tied?" (check)

"Gimme your hand. NOT the one dripping with chocolate. (check)

"Let's go."

I get to the escalator and check to see if my daughter's shoes are tied. I take her hand and she hesitates at the take-off. The teeth of the stairs always scared me a little, too. Past that point, I would be a-okay. About halfway, the ride would become a little boring, so I would start making faces at myself in the shiny metal that enclosed the escalator.

They don't use shiny metal to enclose escalators anymore at Sears. Now, we're kept in with plexiglass, so we can look down at the shoppers. This frightens my daughter, so she clutches my hand and stares forward. I pick her up before we get to the top stair because I don't want her to trip. I was so busy staring at myself when I was her age that I would generally end up face-down and sprawled out on the landing strip. God, my mother could be a bitch. She would pick me up, laugh and drag me through Sears for what seemed like days.

I remove my daughter from my numbing hip and let her walk. My mother tells me that she's surprised the kid **can** walk, considering how much time she spends being carried.

I spot the towel section and walk toward it. God, what plushness. I want maroon towels with the texture of shag carpeting. Blue, yellow, orange, green . . . There they are. I pounce on what remains of them. Maroon must be a popular color this season.

I go to the checkout counter with four, brand-new maroon towels.

They aren't as thick as I would like, but they'll do. God, cheesecloth would be better than what I have now.

I look to my side and realize that my daughter is gone. Oh, shit. She's been kidnapped. I just know it. Oh, why didn't I buy one of those leashes? "I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise."

I run through Sears, yelling my daughter's name. Suddenly, I realize I'm on the second floor. This is the toy floor, and I remember what I used to do when my mother bought towels. In the time it took for her to locate the gaudiest pink bath accessories, I would be ensconced in toys, aisles and aisles away.

I find my daughter by following the sound of a banshee. I dig her out from under a pile of He-Man action figures and apologize to the toy clerk. I whisk my child away and descend the nearest stairs. In my shame, I have forgotten my towels and my purse. I take the escalator back up to the second floor. I calmly approach the towel center so people won't think that it was my kid who had caused the commotion. I make my purchase. The towel clerk looks at me knowingly. He has a disgusted air about him.

At this point, I don't care. I look at my watch. It's almost one. "Days of Our Lives" will be on soon. I ask for a large bag to put my smaller ones into. I think that I piss the guy off.

My daughter is still sobbing as I walk down the steps. My mother used to threaten me when I sobbed. "Just wait 'til we get home. Your father's going to hear about this."

I can't do that to my daughter. I feel too sorry for her. Besides, her father isn't home. That makes me feel sorry for her, too.

As I drive home, I remember that Daddy and I used to be buddies. When Mom threatened me, I would look worried for her sake. I knew, though, that Daddy wasn't going to do anything to me. I was his precious. By the time we got home, I had achieved the most pitiful expression that I could muster. Daddy always fell for it. Mom would order me to "march right inside and tell your father what you did." Very slowly, deliberately would I walk up to my father. I would tell him all that I had done, at least the parts that I remembered. He would smile and pull me onto his lap.

I remember the smell of Daddy. It was a smell of comfort and strength. When I sat in his lap, I knew that I was safe.

I always shared my chocolate peanuts with him. He knew that they were the best, even if they were a mushy, melted mess. He didn't even care if I dropped a few on the carpet. He dropped a few himself.

Sometimes, I would spend Saturdays with Daddy. I was his little helper, or so I thought. Mom would always have jobs lined up for us to

do. I would carry the tools if we worked on the car, the brushes if we painted, or the gas can if we mowed.

We didn't like mowing. Daddy and I thought that it was useless and only created more work. We both dreamt of having a jungle for a front yard, but Mom and the neighbors wouldn't have that. Daddy and I decided that they had no sense of adventure.

After we finished our work, Daddy would often take me out for a treat. We would get ice cream, go to the zoo, or ride the Giant Slide. I thought that it belonged to the Jolly Green Giant. I loved the Giant Slide.

They don't have Giant Slides anymore. It's alright, though, because my daughter doesn't have a father to take her for rides.

My Daddy and I would have to sneak to the Slide because Mom didn't want us to go. She had seen something on television about Giant Slides being bad for the back. We didn't care. We had a sense of adventure.

Daddy would pick the piece of burlap and arrange it just right. He would sit down on it and I would sit on his lap. I felt grown up in a way because I knew that Daddy liked to ride the Giant Slide, too. I was always glad that I didn't have to ride by myself, though. Daddy was there to protect me.

It was slow right after we pushed off, but after the first bump, I knew we were traveling the speed of light. When we hit the rest of the bumps, my stomach would be in my ears, my eyes would double in size, and my hair would go wild. I didn't care that Daddy's vision was blocked, or that my back was in pain. I was riding the Giant Slide.

I remember our last ride on the Giant Slide. I landed in the pillows and bit my tongue. I couldn't move my back. My father stood above me and screamed, "Get up, goddammit! Get up! Why the hell didn't you get your goddamn hair outa my face? It's your own fault. Jesus . . . get up."

I tried to tell Daddy that I couldn't get up, but he didn't hear me. My face was buried in our piece of burlap.

I remember the smell of burlap. My ex-husband and I used burlap to pack our china and glass when we moved from our apartment to our first house. I had to hand wash each piece to get the flecks of burlap dust off of the glass. My hands got itchy and red. It was the first time that I took my wedding ring off.

We had met in high school. He was one of those people who didn't care about what people thought. I should have remembered that when I said "I do."

He wore Sex Appeal cologne by Jovan. My mother called him a hood and asked me if I had any pride, being his girl friend and all. She reminds me of this every time I call her on the phone to cry about how lonely I am since he left. God, my mother can be a bitch.

I have always wondered what my father would have thought of my husband. I still don't know. I haven't seen Daddy in quite a few years. Actually, I probably wouldn't have cared what he thought after our last ride in the Giant Slide.

I certainly didn't care what my mother thought. All I cared about was the fact that when I was with my boyfriend, I would get sweaty palms, my mouth would go dry and my stomach would solidify. When I was with him, I was happy. Now, I achieve the same physical state by drinking enough so I'll have a hangover.

The house that my husband and I moved into needed a little work and a few appliances, so about a week after we moved in, we went to Sears. I bought a pound of double-dipped chocolate peanuts. He told me that I didn't need them. He bought a hammer and I told him that it was a good investment.

We looked at Kenmore washing machines and decided to put a down payment on a top-loading, three-cycle, two water level, white model. My domestic dreams were coming true.

We passed the vacuum cleaner man who stood on a piece of red carpet, because Aunt Agnes and Uncle Charlie had given us a Kenmore upright for a wedding present. I still use it. I bought bags for it today.

I felt so much in love with my husband as we went upstairs to the paint department. We used the stairs because the escalator was too crowded. We held hands on the way up.

I let him choose the colors for the house. I figured that he knew about these things because he had taken art classes in high school. He had even won an arts and crafts award. He had made the furthest-flying paper airplane. He was such a worldly man. I was so impressed with him.

We drove home that day with paint, brushes, hammer, and anticipation. We worked on our one-bedroom, half bathroom house during the entire weekend. Our kitchen seemed much brighter in canary yellow and our bedroom looked much warmer in red. He said that red was the color of passion.

We painted the house again a few months later because the bright colors were giving him headaches. The smell of paint was giving me headaches. He thought that it was an excuse.

We moved to a different house about two years later. He had gotten

a promotion at the construction company. He started to make better money. It was about that time when my mother began to notice positive points about him. She was in debt, so we loaned her some money. In her eyes, my husband had become an angel.

A few months after we moved, he began to change. He started to wear different cologne. When I asked him, he said that he was tired of the same routine. I told him that we had just moved. How could he be tired of it already? That wasn't it. He said that he needed excitement in his life.

I suspected that he was having an affair, but I was too scared to confront him. All of the evidence was there . . . the change in appearance and working hours. I knew that these were the signs because I had a subscription to the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and I had read the article "How to Tell if Your Husband Is Having an Affair" in the December issue.

He even began to dress differently. Instead of overalls, he wore Levi's. His flannel shirts disappeared. He began to wear men's bikini underwear. He was acquiring a sort of class. I knew that something was wrong.

I thought that it was my fault. Maybe I had driven him away. I tried so hard to get him back. I told him that we could paint our new bedroom red — I could drop a few pounds — I could start shaving my legs again. No, that wouldn't do. You can never go back again.

I soon found out that I was pregnant. I didn't tell him about it, though. I didn't want him to feel as if I had trapped him.

I was realizing that I was losing him. And the hardest part was that I couldn't do a goddamned thing about it. I tried. I honestly tried. I tried harder than ever before in my life to try to alter a relationship with a person I loved.

I eventually told him about the baby. I realized that he had a right to know.

We made a concerted effort to patch things up. For a while, the relationship was looking brighter. We even decorated the nursery.

Ultimately, things fell apart again. A girl named Christy kept leaving him messages. I began to realize that he had been right. We had had our fun and there was no way that we could recapture it. We could never relive the good times. I was tired of the smell of paint.

He began to spend more time away from home. I started taking ceramics classes at the Y.

I remember the day he left. I came home from the grocery store. (I bought white grapes and five Hershey's bars.) I found a note on the

television. He was leaving me, it said. I should have known that this would happen all along. He still loved me, but he needed more. He would support me and the baby. He would keep in touch. P.S. He was sorry about the mess in the bathroom.

I could smell it all the way in the den. I went into the bathroom and found his bottle of Sex Appeal shattered on the tiles.

